

Responding to Ungodly Authority – 1

By David de Bruyn

Authority and leadership. It is a natural part of human existence. Without authority – our world would be directionless, chaotic and uncontrollable. Authority is very much the glue that holds society together and enables some form of order in which man can be productive and useful.

Unfortunately, as natural as authority is, it seems as natural to encounter ungodly authority. Evil and wicked leadership is all too often in abundance. How are we to respond to ungodly authority? Ignore it? Resist it? Overthrow it?

No matter who you are – at some point you have been under ungodly leadership. God has set up numerous authority structures in the world and they have no doubt impacted you at some point. In the home – the husband is to lead the wife as Christ loves and leads the church. Father and mother are the authority over children. In society, government is the authority over the citizens. In the workplace, managers, supervisors and superiors exercise authority and leadership. In the church, God has placed the elders or pastors to be his undershepherds – his leaders.

So what do we do when the authority we are under is corrupt? What does a wife do in the face of a wicked, abusive husband? What does an employee do with a malicious, evil-tempered boss determined to abuse his authority? What does a citizen do with a government violating God's laws? What does a church member do with a pastor who is abusive, unloving or proud?

Like it or not, we must all deal with ungodly authority at some point in our lives.

Graciously, God has given us a lengthy, detailed and near flawless example of how to cope with ungodly authority. It is the example of David.

David had to deal with the severest form of wicked leadership in the person of Saul. David's experience was life-changing but it also was ordained by God. God used David's awful experiences with Saul to mold him into a king. As we examine David's life and experience with Saul – we see how David reacted, for the most part, in a wise way and eventually triumphed over ungodly authority. The thoughts and truths that come out of a study like this cannot properly be dealt with in one programme. Today we'll begin by defining ungodly authority.

Let's remember the scene. Saul had already begun his downward spiral when David arrived on the scene. Saul was in rebellion to God, when David was privately anointed. Later, David slays Goliath and becomes an instant hero. He is promoted from court musician to commander in chief of the armies. His success in battle cause his popularity to grow and Saul begin to get jealous. He tries to kill David with a javelin and fails. Later, he tries to kill him by sending him into battle. So begins Saul's hunt for the head of David. David has to flee Saul, and is on the run for a long period of time, till eventually Saul is killed by the Philistines and David is made king. And it is this period of time from when Saul turned on David till his eventual death that we are interested in – for during this period David leaves us with a model of how to respond to ungodly authority.

First, it's important to note why Saul was an ungodly leader. We should recognize the marks of ungodly leadership, for an ungodly leader is not simply one who makes decisions we don't like. Looking at Saul, we can identify if we are truly under ungodly authority, or worse, exercising it ourselves.

Why was Saul ungodly authority?

Primarily because he did not represent God's authority properly. This is the main aim behind authority – to promote God's laws and lordship. When a leader disobeys God's commands and does not accurately reflect God's character – he or she is a poor leader. God's own authority will be questioned when those supposedly representing His authority behave in an ungodly way. What were the specifics of Saul's disobedience and ungodliness?

- 1) Saul was impulsive. In I Samuel 13, we find him impulsively offering a sacrifice when he was instructed to wait for Samuel.
- 2) Saul was self-justifying. Poor leaders can never say – I sinned – I was wrong, I shouldn't have done that. Saul justified his impulsive offering to Samuel. Likewise, when he did not destroy the Amalekites in chapter 15, he told Samuel the people had done it, and moreover, he had disobeyed for a spiritual reason. Poor leadership is extremely proud.
- 3) Saul was also easily threatened. A poor leader is not concerned about the people under him as much as he is about maintaining the dignity of his position and the stability of his position. How heartbreaking it has been to watch an ungodly leader publicly humiliate people who questioned his decisions. They see a question about a decision as a personal attack and then turn around in evil pride to try and highlight the weaknesses of the person asking the question. Ungodly leadership is supremely proud, and guards its reputation and position jealously.
- 4) Saul had foolish expectations for his people. On the day of a great victory over the Philistines, Saul stupidly vowed that no man should eat food until the evening. It greatly hindered the progress of the battle, and caused great conflict when his son Jonathan unwittingly ate. Poor authority expects things from people which they cannot do and then chastises them for it.
- 5) Saul lived in compromise and partial obedience. Saul was told to destroy the Amalekites completely. But instead, he returned with the choice animals which he claimed he would sacrifice to God. He lived in partial obedience.
- 6) Saul had poor family relationships, In 20:30 he screams at Jonathan for siding with David, likewise with Michal in 19:17. Saul's devotion to his position went ahead of all else. How many pastors are there whose children do not know them, whose wives live in misery, while they continue to minister believing they are simply, 'loving Christ more than family'. What they don't see is that real love for God flows out into family. Love for God doesn't divide your love, it multiplies it. Paul said a man who cannot rule his own house cannot rule the house of God. Ungodly leadership inevitably ends up treating those under it the same way it treats family.
- 7) Saul was unstable emotionally. Saul was given to fits of violent temper. Often times he descended into deep depression. One moment he wanted David dead, the next he would swear by God that he wouldn't kill David. We often find him brooding and depressed. In 22:8 we see him with a real persecution complex –

thinking all the people were against him. A poor leader's motto is 'leadership is lonely' and explains his lack of friends as being due to his leadership. Actually it's often because of his self-pitying pride that makes relationships with him near impossible. Also, Saul practiced emotional manipulation. (22:8, 23:7) He gave favours and treated nicely those who performed according to his wishes, I've known people like this. Do it their way, and you get handshakes, smiles, greetings. But get on their wrong side, and it's the cold shoulder, cool greetings and icy conversations. Manipulation!

- 8) Saul broke his own rules. Saul had made a foolish vow that no one should eat before evening and the one who did should be killed. Jonathan ate, and he didn't kill him at the request of the people. Saul outlawed witches and then consulted one himself at Endor. Poor leadership never seems to have a problem with speaking out of both sides of its mouth, because it thinks it's OK to set a standard for others to strive towards, even if it isn't there itself. Saul became ruthless and cruel in his pursuit of David, killing priests along the way. Ungodly authority often becomes that way. Diotrephes in 3 John was putting others down to keep his own position.

Saul's life ended in tragedy and defeat – suicide.

An ungodly leader – allowed disobedience and compromise in his own life, had poor family relationships, was unstable emotionally, manipulated others, was self-justifying, felt threatened by others and overreacted in cruelty and malice. He was a hypocrite who broke his own rules. Next we will see how David, being a godly man responded to such ungodly authority.